

Prisms and Prisons: Religion, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and the Khudai Khidmatgars

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In Appleby's *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, a core theme is ethnoreligious conflict, fundamentalism, and nonviolent peace building in the context of religious militancy. This paper examines how ethnoreligious nationalism and to a lesser extent religious fundamentalism influenced the nonviolent militancy of the Khudai Khidmatgars, arguing that from the vast repository of Islamic tradition and ideas the Khudai Khidmatgars used Islam to give form to a forceful dimension of their nonviolent resistance and peacemaking work. The Khudai Khidmatgars' nonviolent action and the ideas prompting them often embodied multiple religious meanings. A single act might simultaneously draw from elements of ethnoreligious nationalism, fundamentalism and strategic nonviolence. The rich texture of their movement therefore provides a useful illustration of Appleby's key ideas.

Fundamentalism

Appleby suggests religious fundamentalism can be seen as "a specifiable pattern of religious militance by which self-styled true believers attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular structures and processes" (ibid. 86). Fundamentalism was not a strong motivation for the leader and founder of the Khudai Khidmatgars,

Abdul Ghaffar Khan. However, elements of fundamentalism existed among some of the Khudai Khidmatgars -- who were concerned with the marginalization of Islam and intended to restore its hegemony -- which Khan skilfully drew upon to influence their joining the movement and carrying out nonviolent resistance. The movement was not at its core fundamentalist, especially in its firm rejection of universal exclusivity and intolerance toward other traditions. Nevertheless in the course of its strategic nonviolence it asserted that a resurgent Islam could positively reform society.

The Khudai Khidmatgars were launched in November 1929, and by early 1930 they had around 1000 volunteers (Banerjee 56). One of their earliest nonviolent tactics was the picketing and boycott of liquor stores. While this tactic alone was never going to shake the foundations of British imperialism, it was part of a broader campaign of the boycott of foreign-made goods, and as a tactic it reflected the organizing genius of Khan, drawing upon local sentiment against anti-Islamic habits as an initial step in the formation of the movement. One young Khudai Khidmitgar said "1930 was very important because of the liquor movement.... We believed that, after the British, the law of *shari'a* would prevail" (Banerjee 65). Women also participated in these liquor store pickets. Brothels were picketed because prostitution was seen as offensive to Islam. Another

Khudai Khidmitgar said "We listened to Badshah Khan because he first opposed prostitution,... earlier there had been some remnant of Islam in our society but then even that had been taken over by the British" (Banerjee 65).

Indigenous institutions which drew solidly on religious tradition replaced British institutions of law and order. This tactic had a dual purpose: it boycotted "the heart of the colonial administration" (Banerjee 93), and it sought to reform society to reflect religious customs. Khudai Khidmitgar Gul Samand Khan said "When Badshah Khan came to my village he talked to us and said 'Why do you work for the British? This is your own land. Don't report to the British for any help. You have your own laws!' After the meeting, his words had a good effect. People were enthused. After Badshah Khan left I called a meeting and we decided to form our own courts and enforce the *shari'a* law" (Banerjee 94). Dual use was also seen in Khan's advocacy that the full rights of women under *shari'a* law be respected. "His emphasis on *shari'a* law was specifically related to his long-time support for proper women's inheritance rights, which the Quran prescribes but which Pathan tradition neglected" (Banerjee 98). But Khan was also fully aware of the nascent movement for the liberation of women in the rest of India -- a modernist movement -- and he wanted Pakhtun women likewise to be liberated.

Ethnoreligious nationalism

Appleby comments "the ambivalence of the sacred gives religious leadership its decisive character" (ibid. 55). When Zia ul-Haq seized dictatorial power in Pakistan, only fundamentalists offered organized political support, which he

duly took advantage of. Commenting on the alleged religious devotion of such political figures, Abdul Ghaffar Khan said "the men with guns have become the prayer experts" (Gandhi 254). Of course Khan himself was very much a political figure in whom the twin calls of religion and nationalism were integral. Khan publicly drew extensively upon Islam and was recognized by his followers for doing so, thus he was a religious leader despite never holding a formal religious position. That both he and Zia ul-Haq -- two very different leaders with starkly contrasting socioeconomic, cultural and political visions -- could publicly and repeatedly draw on religion affirms Appleby's idea of religion's inherent internal pluralism.

Matters of identity are rarely simple, and many Pakhtuns have been known to believe "first I am a Pakhtun, second a Muslim, and third a Pakistani." While Abdul Ghaffar Khan firmly opposed the partition of India, once it became a reality he strived for Pakhtun autonomy within the new Muslim state of Pakistan. In 1948, sensing repression of his people within the new state, Khan called for the establishment of Pakhtunistan -- "rule of the Pakhtuns, by the Pakhtuns, and for the Pakhtuns" (Gandhi 209). Khan and a thousand of his followers were arrested later that year, and on August 12, "the Babra massacre occurred, when the police fired at hundreds of men and women assembling at the mosque in Babra village.... Their aim was to pray for arrested relatives and friends. Hanging from the necks of many of the women were miniature copies of the Qur'an, some of which the bullets pierced.... It seems that the police addressed the Pathans gathered in Babra as 'Hindus' and dubbed the mosque a Hindu mosque" (Gandhi 209-210).

Commenting on the sacrilegious nature of this assault, Khan said "[n]ot only were many faithful Pathans and their women riddled with bullets, but also the Holy Koran!" (Khan 209).

The Babra tragedy, in which 150 were killed and 400 wounded, well illustrates the deeply contested notion of religious and national identity. From a spiritual perspective, it is difficult to imagine a more remarkable 20th century Muslim than Abdul Ghaffar Khan, who spent an unbroken 75 years in the service of his people. The name Khudai Khidmatgars -- Servants of God -- itself illustrates the religious basis of the Pakhtuns' movement. The Pakhtuns had been Muslim for hundreds of years. Yet because Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgars worked toward a vision of a united India that embraced all religions equally, notions of religious exclusivity were seized on and thrown against them by leaders who used and abused Islam for narrow political ends. When the religious identify their tradition "so closely with the fate of a people or a nation that they perceive a threat to either as a threat to the sacred" (Appleby 107) it is hardly surprising that many non-Pakhtun Pakistanis would label Khan as a traitor and demand to know what he had done for Islam. It also illustrates that "religious behavior cannot be confidently predicted merely on the basis of an individual's or group's affiliation with a specific religious tradition" (Appleby 56).

Nonviolent militancy

Appleby says "the religious mind is perpetually interpretive; religious actors must determine anew 'what the badge stands for' in each concrete situation" (ibid. 68). He suggests "[r]ather than a

direct translation of the 'mind of God' into human action, religion is a far more ambiguous enterprise, containing *within itself* the authority to kill and to heal, to unleash savagery, or to bless humankind with healing and wholeness" (ibid. 29). This view is shared by Banerjee when she says "as with any of the great religious texts, one can find passages within the Quran which justify very different actions and ethics" (Banerjee 148).

Abdul Ghaffar Khan said "the Quran teaches *jihad*, which in its real sense means to struggle for the welfare and advancement of its followers" (Banerjee 148). Khudai Khidmitgar Mohammed Yakub Khan recalled Abdul Ghaffar Khan "always talked of peace... in our movement, fighting was considered bad. He used to quote to us from a [Quranic] *hayat* which said that war is a bad thing... whether with one's own or with the British" (Banerjee 149). Khudai Khidmitgar Deran Shah said "nonviolence was started only after our meeting with Gandhi. But we did not follow it because Gandhi told us to and because he was a leader. We followed it because in Islam our Prophet also said that violence does not solve anything" (Banerjee 149). Banerjee states "The militant religious leaders in the Frontier who led the tribesmen in [violent] *jihad* against the British repression were acting in a thoroughly legitimate Islamic way, taking up arms in righteous rebellion where they saw no alternative way to alleviate the forces of oppression. Equally, however, Badshah Khan was perfectly justified in Quranic terms in urging his followers to abandon the aggression that comes of hate and to identify an alternative means for combating colonial injustice: a non-violent practice which built upon the

virtues of patience and self-restraint" (ibid. 148-149).

Unlike religious extremists, religious militants of a peace building kind "are open to truth wherever it may be found" (Appleby 142). In his English autobiography, *My Life and Struggle*, Khan spoke proudly of the flowering of Buddhism and the founding of Zoroastrianism among his ancestors. While in prison, Khan "greatly enjoyed" listening to Sikhs (Khan 74); he "studied both the holy Koran and Bhagavat Gita profoundly and reverently" (Khan 194). At the time of partition, the Khudai Khidmatgars successfully protected Sikhs and Hindus in their area from the communal violence that engulfed much of the rest of the subcontinent. Khan said "my religion is truth, love, and service to God and humanity. Every religion that has come into the world has brought the message of love and brotherhood. And those who are indifferent to the welfare of their fellowmen, those whose hearts are empty of love, those who do not know the meaning of brotherhood, those who harbor hatred and resentment in their hearts, they do not know the meaning of Religion" (Khan 195).

Conclusion

Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his Khudai Khidmatgars envisioned a triple transformation of their society. They wanted greater control of their ethnic and

religious destiny. Individually they wanted to live religiously, and collectively see public life reflect religious norms. Most significantly -- given the remarkable power of the Khudai Khidmatgar character and its so far unique historical stature -- in the face of severe trials they held fast to the realization of their movement as a nonviolent prism giving focused, colorful, and vibrant expression to the diffuse light of Islam. The price Khan paid for his nonviolent Islamic militancy was 30 years in prison, 15 years in prisons run by the British, and another 15 in those run by the Islamic Government of Pakistan.

Bibliography

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